

SATYAJIT RAY- REMEMBERED

MANORAMA JAJA



It was 1981 when the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC) was founded by Mr. Shankar Pillai and it was decided that the Association would also publish a quarterly journal WRITER AND ILLUSTRATOR. I was nominated as Secretary General and also editor of the journal.

I took out my diary and planned the first and second issues. In the first issue we published the profile of Shankar as author and illustrator for children. For the second issue of the journal, Satyajit Ray—editor, author and illustrator for children was my choice.

I had met Mrs. Leela Majumdar at the Semi-

nar on children's books. This was organised by Children's Book Trust on the occasion of the International Children's Book Fair in 1979.

Mrs. Leela Majumdar is the aunt of Mr. Ray and was editing SANDESH along with him. Besides, she is one of the finest persons I have ever met. Who could have been better than she to write about Mr. Ray? I thought.

I wrote to Leela and requested her to write a profile of Satyajit Ray as a writer and illustrator of children's books. She readily agreed and promptly sent a very good article on Ray. I was keen to get something substantial to go with the article, so I decided to write a letter to him. One of my friends told me that "He does not reply." I ignored his comment and wrote a letter and also sent him the first issue of the AWIC quarterly journal. I received his reply promptly.

I wrote another letter and received his second letter. I was thrilled to see another letter in long hand.

9 December 1981

Dear Mrs. Jaja,

Thank you for your letter and for the magazine. I'm surprised to find SANDESH—the children's monthly which Mrs. Majumdar and I edit—not included in the list published by the magazine. I hope the next issue will amend this error.

The Bengali name of the story I have translated is BONKUBABUR BONDHU. How much time will you give me for the illustrations to go with this? I could mail a couple in a week time.

I had given Mrs. Majumdar about 10 samples of my illustration. She was supposed to send them on to you. They were not identified; but does this matter? You can just publish them as examples of my work. Originally they were all published in monthly SANDESH.

With regards,
Yours sincerely
Satyajit Ray

SATYAJIT RAY

1/1 Bishop Lefroy Road, Calcutta 20

30/11/81

Su Manorama Dafa

c/o Children's Book Trust

New Delhi ?

Dear Su Dafa,

Su Rita Majumdar has asked me to send
you this translation of my story to go with
her article on me. I'm sorry the MS has
to be in long hand; a thumb injury
prevents me from using the typewriter.

May I see a proof - in case it is decided
to publish the story?

Yrs sincerely

Satyajit Ray

BONKUBABU'S FRIEND

Satyajit Ray

Nobody had ever seen Bonkubabu lose his temper. Indeed, it was very hard to guess how he would behave, what he would do or say, if he ever did lose his temper....

With these words, and with a hearty slap on the back of Bhairab Chakravarty which sent him into a fit of coughing, Bonkubabu left the room.

At that very moment, Paunkanai dropped a full tea-cup which broke into smithereens and splattered everybody's clothes with hot liquid.

[translated by the author]

Then, on my request, he sent the English translation of his story '*Bonku Babu's Friend*.' This story was originally written in Bengali in 1961 for his children's magazine SANDESH. Earlier, he had been writing only in Bengali—his mother tongue. This was the first story he ever translated in English. Because of a thumb injury he wrote the translated story in long hand. I received two more letters from him. He wanted to see the edited version of his story before it was sent to press.

While editing the story, I discovered a minor factual error. For a moment, I doubted my own ability and took three days to confirm. I corrected it. As he had wished, I mailed the edited version for his approval. He sent it back to me with a short note.

Then I wrote to Mr. Ray again and requested him to send at least two illustrations of his story. He sent these in record time. Later, these illustrations were included in the first ever exhibition of original art work in Indian children's books, organised by AWIC in New

Delhi in 1989 and later in the exhibition at Bologna (Italy) in April 1992

One of the illustrations was later included in the catalogue titled INDIAN ILLUSTRATORS 1960-1992 published by the AWIC. Mr. Ray was in the hospital when this catalogue was ready, and I had thought I could send a copy to him. But before we could mail one, he passed away on 21 April 1992.

Writer of 23 children's books, Ray was a unique person. He was well known as an outstanding film maker but few know him as a writer and illustrator for children. When his son Sandeep was a boy, he restarted publication of SANDESH—a children's magazine, in 1961 and wrote the story '*Bonkubabu's Friends*'. This indeed was his favourite story in English. Since 1961 he had been editing, writing and illustrating for SANDESH.

I could never see Mr. Ray in person but this short acquaintance through his letters certainly brought him close to us. We will always remember him as our friend and well wisher.